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Op Ed -- IMHBCO (In My Humble But Correct Opinion) -- LJ And The NRA: Separated at Birth? Or, Knee-Jerk Politics Makes Strange Bedfellows

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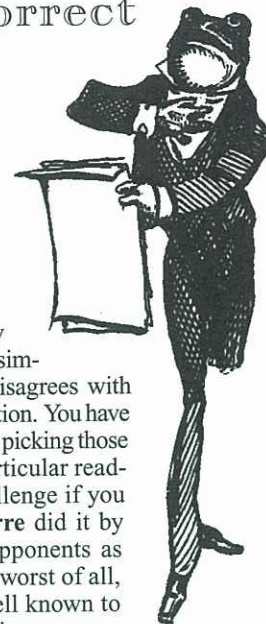
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IMHBCO (In My Humble But Correct Opinion) — LJ And The NRA: Separated at Birth? Or, Knee-Jerk Politics Makes Strange Bedfellows

by Rick Anderson (University of Nevada, Reno) <rickand@unr.edu>



I'm a regular reader of *Slate*, the online news and commentary magazine. I know it's part of the **Microsoft Military-Industrial Complex**, but *Slate* offers enough witty and insightful writing that I'm usually able to put aside my reflexive aversion to all things **Microsoft** for a few moments each morning and just enjoy.

This past May, *Slate* offered a particularly entertaining piece by **Timothy Noah** entitled "The NRA's Moral Equivalence."¹ The subheader read as follows: "**Wayne LaPierre** sees no difference between gun-control advocates and **Osama Bin Laden**." It seems that **LaPierre**, executive vice president of the **National Rifle Association**, had made a speech at that group's recent annual convention in Reno, Nevada. In the speech, **LaPierre** referred to a gun-control advocacy group called **Americans for Gun Safety** as "the visible side of a shadowy network of extremist social guerrillas" and "anti-freedom elitists" who, along with like-minded individuals and organizations in the media and academia, "form a sort of Taliban" that "operates and sounds a lot like **Osama bin Laden** and the **al Qaeda**." These "extremists" are engaged in "fomenting fear for political gain" and desire nothing less than — get this — to "hijack your freedom and take a box-cutter to the Constitution of the United States."²

Whew!

Well, this certainly made for entertaining, if also frustrating, reading. The entertainment factor comes from seeing a representative of the **NRA** make such a complete jackass of himself in public. Comparing a gun-control advocacy group to the terrorists who destroyed the **World Trade Center** and murdered thousands of innocent people? It's an analogy that takes **LaPierre** beyond the charted terrain of traditional demagoguery and well into the realm of pure idiocy.

The frustration comes from seeing someone get away with this sort of nonsense in front of an adoring audience. Demagogues are nothing new, but it's always upsetting to see them being encouraged. Reasonable people of good will can (and do) disagree on gun control issues, but how could any reasonable person of good will — even one who strongly opposes gun control — listen to a screed like **LaPierre's** and not end up either laughing or weeping?

I experienced another feeling as I read **LaPierre's** rantings: a little twinge of *déjà vu*. I had read something similar someplace else recently — what was it? It took me a minute, but then I realized with some bemusement that it had been in the editorial pages of *Library Journal*. In the April 15 issue, editor-in-chief **John N. Berry III's** regular editorial essay was titled "Fear of Information,"³ and while it was a little bit more restrained in tone than **Wayne LaPierre's** address to the **NRA**, it employed the same rhetorical strategy: the substitution of name-calling and tendentious language for serious and substantive argument.

It's a simple and time-honored approach: if you don't want to bother your readers with boring old logic, or if you're afraid that a logical argument won't lead your readers to the conclu-

sion you prefer, you can easily entertain and distract them by simply demonizing anyone who disagrees with your (and presumably their) position. You have to choose your epithets carefully, picking those that will best provoke your particular readership, but that's no great challenge if you know your audience. **LaPierre** did it by referring to his ideological opponents as conspirators, "terrorists" and, worst of all, "elitists," all terms that are well known to stimulate the attack response in conservatives. **Berry** does it by calling them "extreme zealots," "censors" and "ideologs" (sic), all terms well known to evoke the same reaction in librarians.

Who are **Berry's** extreme, censorious ideological zealots, and what is their offense? Some are participants in the **ALA's Office of Intellectual Freedom** email discussion list who think that libraries should filter children's Internet access, and who he says have "captured" that forum.⁴ Beyond that, he doesn't sound completely clear about their identities. They seem to include anyone who thinks it's a bad idea for libraries to give children unrestricted Internet access, and who promotes that view in public. Filtering Internet access for kids is, in **Berry's** view, nothing less than tyranny, and those who suggest otherwise are, at best, stooges of tyranny and, at worst, tyrants themselves.

But these "filtering zealots" are not just tyrannical; they are also craven. In fact, the thrust of **Berry's** editorial is that those who disagree with him harbor a "fear of information" — a fear which, he argues, is both on the rise in America and also fully justified, for (cue the trumpets) "information — is our weapon." "We" being, of course, the fearless defenders of intellectual freedom, and "they" being the cowering minions of censorship and religious fundamentalism. The naïve among us might believe that those who publicly support Internet filtering for children are normal people participating in a political debate, but **Berry** sets us straight: they are extremists, and are trying to "impose their morality and ideology on all of us." (It goes without saying, of course, that those who favor giving children unrestricted access to the Internet are doing no such thing.) **Berry's** worldview, like **LaPierre's**, is dualistic: there are those who valiantly uphold the cause of freedom, and those who treacherously subvert that freedom in order to impose their oppressive ideologies on others. According to both **Berry** and **LaPierre**, we must circle the wagons; it is necessary for the faithful to pledge strict adherence to the party line. **Berry's** party line differs from **LaPierre's**, of course, but the demonization of all who depart from it does not.

There is a great irony here. It lies in the fact that even as **Berry** celebrates the ability of information to liberate "the people" from "oppressive orthodoxies," he is calling on librarians everywhere to hew strictly to the **ALA** platform and

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implicitly criticizing anyone who strays from it. "The banner of ALA is the one under which we organize to take our professional stand on intellectual freedom," he proclaims, and warns us that unless we remain strictly faithful to that orthodoxy, we run the risk of "go(ing) along with the filtering zealots."

Filtering is a difficult issue. But contrary to **Berry's** assertion, the question is not whether one "can learn the varieties of sexual activity without practicing them." The question (or one of them, anyway) is whether children should be allowed to explore the varied world of sexual activity without restriction in public libraries. This question is controversial, as it should be, since it involves a clash of fundamental values — the safety of children and the freedom to inquire. Reasonable people of good will can (and do) disagree on how that conflict should be resolved. But how can any reasonable person of good will — even one who strongly opposes filtering — read a screed like **Berry's** and not end up either weeping or laughing?

Personally, I think a little dissent on this topic (among others) would do the ALA a world of good. There is far too much groupthink in this profession. I suggest it's time that we heed the advice of the **Great Helmsman**, and "(let) a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend."⁵ Much more than facile speechifying, we need serious people willing to tackle these problems in a serious way. For the ALA to define an official stance on an issue is entirely appropriate, but there should be room in the library profession for more than one viewpoint. Call me a traitor, but it seems to me that no one who tries to tell us what to think should go unchallenged. 🐘

Endnotes

1. <http://slate.msn.com/?id=2065227>.
2. The entire speech is viewable at <http://www.nralive.com/index2.cfm>.
3. *Library Journal*, 4/15/2002, v. 127 iss. 7, p.8.
4. It is difficult to see in what meaningful sense that discussion has been "captured" by either side in the debate, however. I'm not a subscriber to the list myself, but I did go to the considerable effort required to gain access to the list's archives and took a quick look at the conversation that took place over the course of one recent period. It appears to me that, far from having "captured" the discussion, those in favor of filtering are engaged in lively conversation with those who oppose it. It looks to me as if the voices against filtering are at least as numerous — and certainly as vociferous — on the list as those in favor of it. I was, however, struck by the irony that in order to access the archives of a list administered by the Office of Intellectual Freedom, I had to register and give my email address!
5. Mao, Zedong. Address delivered in Peking, 27 February, 1957.

ATG Special Report — Libraries In The Cyberage

by **Mark Y. Herring** (Dean of Library Services, Dacus Library, Winthrop University) <herringm@winthrop.edu>

During the summer of 2000, Dacus archivist **Ron Chepesiuk** and I sat down with a simply goal: put together a series of forums to discuss the groundbreaking changes that libraries had been, and were certain to continue, to undergo as a result of the advent of the World Wide Web. We knew we could not talk about everything but we felt certain there were four or five key issues that ought to get widespread ventilation. Like it or not, libraries are in the cyberage. Although many librarians know this, many of us may feel, at times, we are more like lost in cyberspace. With some discussion and a common theme to hold those discussions together, we thought we might aid in the understanding of libraries and cyberage issues.

Out of a series of meetings we ended up with four forums discussing a wide variety of libraries and cyberage issues: Internet filtering, online/electronic publishing and the rush to e-orcize libraries, copyright in the digital age, and the Humanities and cyberspace. We pitched the idea to the **South Carolina Humanities Council** (**Bob Ellis** in particular) and soon we had ourselves a small grant with the goal of making libraries and cyber-issues better known. The forums occurred during the academic year 2000-2001.



Because we wanted statewide coverage, we planned two of the forums, the first and the last, at **Winthrop**. One took place in Greenville-Spartanburg and another in Charleston. Even before we had the first speaker, we knew we wanted the rights to publish these talks, if for no other reason than because we wanted both a permanent record, and the ability to reach a wider audience. We believe we have accomplished both, but more, we hope to lengthen the discussions by raising these issues in print.

Enter **Against the Grain** and **Katina Strauch**. After a number of discussions, **Katina** agreed to publish our ruminations in

four issues of the well-known **ATG**. We hope you enjoy these. We think the talks are provocative, interesting, and even likely to raise hackles. What we hope they will do is raise awareness to a higher level about the issues themselves, about where librarians

are in them, and about possible courses of action. Particulars of each forum will appear in the general introduction that **Katina** has asked me to write.

Our thanks are in surfeit to **Katina**, to the **South Carolina Humanities Council** without whose help none of this would have been possible, and especially President **Anthony DiGiorgio** of Winthrop University. 🐘

Libraries In The Cyberage — Filtering, Censorship and the First Amendment: Libraries at the Crossroads

by **Mark Y. Herring** (Dean of Library Services, Dacus Library, Winthrop University) <herringm@winthrop.edu>

No other event strikes more at the heart of absolutist interpretation of the First Amendment than Internet filtering; and no other issue raises the hackles of so many on both sides of this argument than whether or not librarians should filter the Internet. When this issue came before our forum in 2000-2001, filtering was a very hot topic, to say the least. Today, with **CIPA** (**Children's Internet Protection Act**) still smoldering in Philadelphia, followed by the Supreme Court's astonishing decision in **CPPA**, the **Child Pornography Prevention Act** (1996) in May 2002, and you have all the makings of a white-hot debate. **CIPA** failed to get the court's attention while in **CPPA**, the court

made one of its finer distinctions: good virtual porn versus bad virtual porn. It reminds one of those fantastic, mystical emanations that **Justice Warren** called "penumbras" or shadows that he saw all over the Constitution, and which, he argued, allowed for abortion-on-demand.

At any rate, the upshot of these cases left those favoring filtering racing back to the drawing board. Librarians' refusal to filter pornography off of library computer defies description. When traces of alar-treated apples were found in jars of apple juice some years ago, and it was then determined that if you ate 750 alar-treated apples for 70 years,

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